An Evaluation Study of an Executive Master of Business Administration (EMBA) Program in an Urban City: Examining the Transfer of Knowledge and Leadership Practices

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Abstract

This study examined the effectiveness of the Executive Master of Business Administration (EMBA) degree program in terms of transfer of knowledge and leadership practices. Based on a review of literature related to adult learning theories, EMBA programs, the importance of evaluation practices, and leadership practices, this study was designed to determine whether an EMBA education can lead to the transfer of knowledge at workplaces to demonstrate and facilitate an employee's leadership skills. Findings from this study showed that the curriculum and the transfer of knowledge were the most significant predictors of the use of leadership practices. Age and gender were found influential in the development of leadership skills. A significant finding was that curriculum was the most salient factor in determining the effectiveness of the transfer of knowledge and in promoting the use of leadership practices.

Keywords: leadership, evaluation, curriculum, adult education, EMBA education

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

In the past few decades, as business corporations have evolved to meet the needs of globalization, technological development, and the rapid exchange of information, the demand for advanced management education has increased. To succeed in these complex environments, managers cannot rely solely on what they learned as undergraduates and on what has been required by their employers if they are to enhance their management skills as team leaders, coaches, and mentors. Life-long learning in business organizations is not limited to management skills but also includes developing leadership skills that focus on enhancing the ability to apply knowledge to innovation and real-world problem solving. To satisfy the needs of corporate employers, business schools have developed degree or non-degree programs, as well as custom programs for current and future business leaders.

Clark and Estes (2002) noted the difference in business fields between education and information, job aid, and training. The benefits of information, job aid, and training are that they support employees‘ learning of how-to knowledge; whereas the benefit of education is that it provides trainees with the knowledge to solve novel and unanticipated problems. From the perspective of business organizations, Master of Business Administration (MBA) or Executive Master of Business Administration (EMBA) programs are long-term business investments for ensuring that leaders develop a set of leadership skills and possess the strategic management foresight to manage their teams.

MBA and EMBA programs provide their graduates with returns on investment by contributing to their fast-tracking careers. However, there is little research regarding the relationship between transfer of knowledge and leadership practices and the extent to which participants apply that knowledge to practice and achieve organizational goals. One of the most important objectives of EMBA programs is to prepare middle- or senior-level managers to be outstanding managers, leaders, and professionals. While large amounts of money are spent each year for executive education to develop leadership competency, the

outcome has not been satisfactorily proved (Boyatzis & Saatcioglu, 2008).

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

Organizations and individuals make significant financial and human resource investments into MBA/EMBA programs. This high cost of training and education has caused Human Resource Development (HRD) and training practitioners to focus on measuring whether these programs help their employees to close gaps in their management and leadership knowledge (Foreman, 2008). Today, the assessment of management training programs is not limited to overall satisfaction or knowledge level, but also includes the transfer of learning to behavior and leadership practices.

Many specialists have found that the Kirkpatrick model, which describes four basic level models (reaction, learning, transfer, and results), has been useful in evaluating professional educational programs (Clark & Estes, 2002). Management education should provide participants with an expansive reservoir of knowledge in learning situations, as well as the tools to solve real-life problems that lead to an immediate application of knowledge at their workplace. However, the application of knowledge and the outcome of knowledge in the Kirkpatrick four-level model have been neglected due to the great cost and effort expended by educators to evaluate the attainment of goals that are linked to participants‘ achievements in professional education (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006).

According to Barbara Carpenter, head of Thunderbird‘s EMBA program, customized EMBA programs have been launched and developed in response to students‘ changing interests and companies‘ needs (Hansen, 2008). Hannum and Martineau (2008) emphasized the necessity of participants‘ critical knowledge, awareness, and ability to apply learning toward behavioral changes after the completion of leadership development programs. Chang-Chien (2005) reported that the EMBA curriculum was found to be positively related to training

transfer at the workplace. Consequently, universities should examine whether their programs meet the needs of business corporations to prepare future innovative business leaders and whether the programs satisfy the motivation of students in terms of their immediate and long-term desire to become effective managers.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of EMBA degree programs in terms of learning transfer and outcome factors at a large private four-year university in an urban city. This study sought to measure the degree to which participants in their leadership programs were able to transfer classroom learning to actual workplace behaviors and increase leadership skills. It also evaluated whether the EMBA programs, whose goals were developing leadership capabilities, met their objective by promoting the application of practical knowledge and tools to real-world situations to satisfy employers‘ needs.

Specifically, this study explored how current EMBA students and graduates responded to four levels of evaluation based on the Kirkpatrick models and how they demonstrate their leadership practices at their workplace based on the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI; Kouzes & Posner, 1988). Employees‘ expectations regarding additional benefits as a result of completing the EMBA program were measured via an open-ended question.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Adult education theory has focused on differentiating itself from children‘s education. Most theorists agree that adults learn from situational experiences in their informal or incidental learning circumstances; however, they note the limitation of informal or incidental learning in terms of the extent to which adult students are ready to learn or are motivated to learn. Andragogy theory, which is a well- known theory of adult learning, is based on several assumptions. Many andragogy advocates have emphasized self-directed learning, immediate

application of knowledge, and cooperative learning with colleagues and facilitators (Glickman, C. D., Gordon, S. P., & Ross-Gordon, J. M., 2007). There are several debates regarding adult learning theories; however, adult learning theorists are in agreement that adult learning requires intellectual or manual processes as a means for change, development, and growth for the acquisition of professional knowledge or skills.

As EMBA programs have proliferated in recent years, effective curricula have been required to meet employers‘ need for competent managers and innovative team leaders. Thus, business schools have developed improved courses that are more immediately relevant to their students‘ careers. However, there is still controversy about the quality of managers in business fields (Smith, 2007), and some researchers claim that there are still problems in training students to become effective managers in some areas such as in leadership capabilities.

Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2006) have noted the importance of the evaluation process in checking the effectiveness of a program. Their evaluation process emphasizes how the program has contributed to an organization‘s objectives and goals, whether to continue or discontinue the program, and how to improve the program. Kirkpatrick‘s four- level model (reaction, knowledge, transfer, and results) is still the most frequently used evaluation method in leadership development programs since the system measures overall satisfaction, improvement of transfer of learning, and outcome in business sectors. Evaluation at the *results* level measures organizational growth, such as increased sales, productivity and profits, as well as personal growth, such as improved interpersonal communication skills/ human relations, the quality of work life, leadership, time management, and decision-making capabilities.

American companies spend over 100 billion dollars each year on training and development activities (Fareman & Ban, 1993). However, there are still doubts as to whether the financial resources were well spent toward achieving positive changes in individual and organizational behavior. Surprisingly, there are few systematic evaluation practices to test the linkage between

training and transfer of learning to behavior in the workplace. Newstrom (1986) claimed that too much money and attention has been spent on the design and delivery of programs and that little time and money have been allocated to evaluation practices for measuring the transfer of learning to the work environment. Likewise, there still has been little attention paid to assessing whether participants are changed in their attitudes, behavior, and performance through management education.

There have been arguments among academics and practitioners regarding evaluation practices. There is little empirical evidence linking the transfer of learning to changes in performance and there is limited guidance on how to conduct evaluations (Fareman & Ban, 1993). Over the past decades, public and private organizations have initiated the measurement of outcome factors to justify the effectiveness of the adult education or training programs; consequently, they have been interested in evaluating the impact of training programs. Evaluators in business corporations and private consulting companies have relied on the Kirkpatrick four-level evaluation to measure and improve organizational productivity and to enhance leadership capabilities.

In EMBA programs, few studies have examined evaluation practices in regard to transfer of knowledge and leadership abilities due to the perceived complexity of level3 (transfer) and level 4(results) in Kirkpatrick‘s (1994) four-level model. There has been debate regarding Kirkpatrick‘s four-level evaluation in terms of feasibility and the fact that there is little empirical evidence to support the success of four-level evaluation in public or private sectors. However, Kirkpatrick‘s (1994) model is important in attempting to measure behavior change and outcomes for evaluating the success of the programs in adult education.

Kouzes and Posner have created wealth of practical suggestions, commitments, exercises, and examples of leadership behavior in many fields (Middlehurst, 1989). Their interest in leadership practices focuses on leaders‘ behavioral changes which instill motivation in their followers. They have stressed that leadership can be learned and developed through trial and error, people, and education in the process of managing and leading.

They have emphasized *soft skills* such as managing people (Sumner et al., 2006) through values, motivation, and encouragement rather than *hard systems* such as rules, controls and procedures (Middlehurst, 1989). However, some researchers have pointed out that both hard and soft systems are prerequisites for organizational success. Kouzes and Posner (2007) have proposed five guidelines to would-be leaders who want to take on the challenge of implementing exemplary leadership practices: *Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart*. These guidelines are invaluable in that the assessment process offers information to supervisors or managers about their strengths and weaknesses in terms of personality traits and ways to enhance their overall leadership capabilities. The Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) developed by Kouzes and Posner (1988) has been widely used to measure leadership skills in business organizations. Despite some disputes regarding the five leadership practices, they are looked upon as a useful guide to academics and practitioners for thinking about leadership capabilities.

METHODOLOGY

This study explored how current students and graduates responded to the four levels of evaluation based on Kirkpatrick‘s (1994) model and how they demonstrated their leadership practices at their workplace based on Kouzes and Posner‘s (1988) framework. As an evaluation measurement was not created by Kirkpatrick, Chang-Chien‘s (2005) four levels (expectations, curriculum, work environment, and transfer of knowledge) as independent variables were applied to the conceptual framework of Kirkpatrick‘s four levels (reaction, learning, transfer, and results), and used as surrogates for Kirkpatrick‘s four levels. Kouzes and Posner‘s (1988) leadership practices were used as dependent variable (see Figure 1).

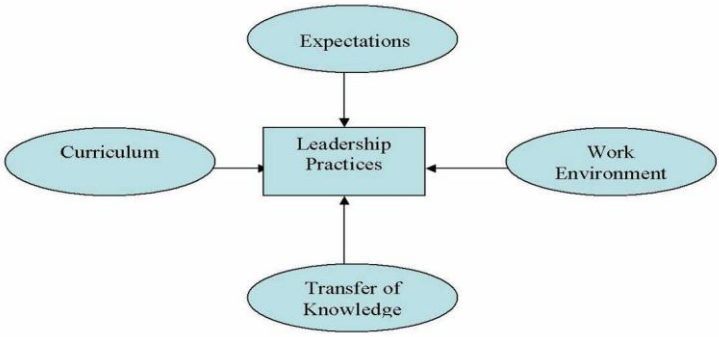


Figure 1. **The basic research design.**

Sample and Population

The sample consisted of 148 current EMBA students (43 —students") and recent graduates (105 —graduates") of EMBA programs at a large private university in Southern California, where the curricula cover both traditional programs and application of knowledge to develop leadership capabilities. The mean age of the respondents was 40.75 years, and they averaged 18.26 years of work experience. The majority of those of participants (86.0%) were male.

Instrumentation

Two instruments were administered to all participants: Kirkpatrick's Evaluation Model modified by Chang-Chien (2005) and the LPI (see Figure 2). In addition, a demographic questionnaire was included to provide information regarding age, gender, and years of work experience. The two questionnaires were used as major instruments in this study after receiving permission from Chang-Chien and Kouzes and Posner.

The survey instrument, based on Kirkpatrick's (1994) evaluation model, was a questionnaire adapted and modified from an instrument developed by R. F. Chang (2002) that was later modified and translated into English for a doctoral dissertation study at the University of Idaho by Chang-Chien (2005). She

modified the instrument to evaluate the effectiveness of Taiwan‘s current EMBA programs. In her measurement expectations, curriculum, work environment, and training transfer were utilized to evaluate the effectiveness of the EMBA curricula and delivery.

Although her measurement levels are not exactly equivalent with Kirkpatrick‘s levels, Kirkpatrick‘s (1994) four-level framework was used as a benchmark for evaluation in her study (Chang-Chien, 2005). Chang-Chien conducted a pilot survey on the Internet using the translated questionnaire. Cronbach‘s alphas for sections 1 (expectations), 2 (curriculum), 3 (work environment), and 4 (training transfer) were .85, .81, .92, and .91, respectively. As the reliability of the instrument ranged from .81 to .96 in the pilot study, her measurement was used as the major instrument for this current study.

Covariates (Control Variables)

Leadership practices cannot be examined solely from Kirkpatrick‘s four levels of evaluation. For this current study, in addition to the variables of expectations, curriculum, work environment, transfer of knowledge, and leadership practices, demographic variables (age, gender, and work experience) were used as controls. This enables the determination of the contribution of the predictor variables above and beyond the contributions of age, gender, and prior experience.

Data Analysis

This study used descriptive and inferential statistical data analyses to measure the transfer of knowledge and leadership practices. All quantitative data were coded and prepared for computerized analysis via the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS®), Student version 15.0. Zero-order Pearson product correlation, two-tailed independent samples *t* tests, analysis of variance (ANOVA) with Welch statistics, and hierarchical multiple regression analysis were conducted.

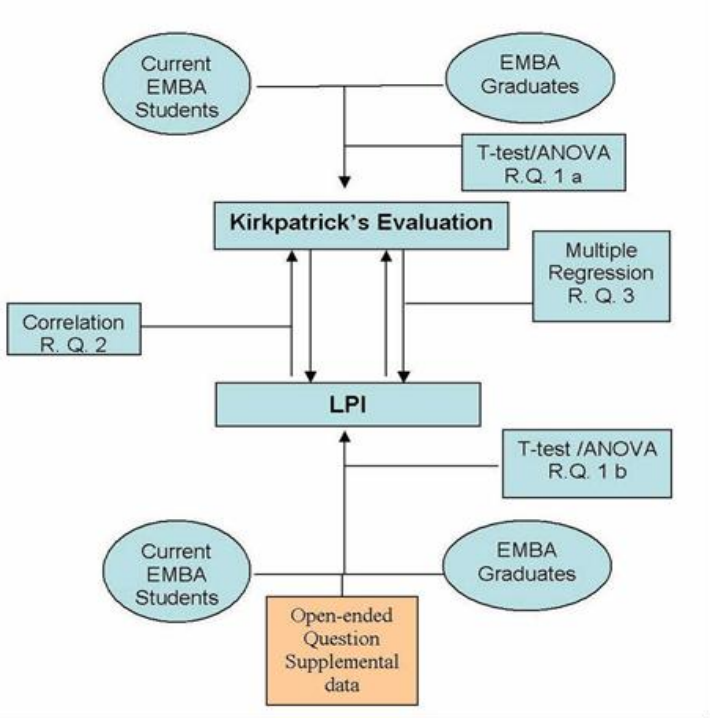


Figure 2. **The detailed research design.**

RESULTS

All leadership practices were significantly related to one another at the .01 level. Curriculum was significantly correlated with all leadership practices at the .01 level, while transfer of knowledge was not related to any leadership practices except to *enable others to act,* $r = .18$, $p < .05$.

Research question 1 asked: *Do current students and graduates of the EMBA program differ in Kirkpatrick's (1994) four-level evaluation scales as measured by expectations, curriculum,, work environment, and transfer of knowledge and Kouzes and Posner's (1988) five leadership practices (modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart)?*

It would be expected that two-tailed *t* tests of independent samples, presuming a normal distribution, would have approximately the same variance. The results of the *t* tests in the present study showed different group variances in some variables. Therefore, a one-way ANOVA with Welch's statistics was conducted because it is insensitive to equality of variances and similarity of sample sizes. The results of the ANOVA showed that *expectations* differed significantly between current students and graduates, $p = .05$, and that the between-group difference in *transfer of knowledge* was marginally significant, $p = .07$.

Results related to research question 1 showed that most of the leadership practice subscales, except *model the way,* were significantly different between groups (current students and graduates), indicating that graduate students were more likely to demonstrate leadership capacities after completion of the EMBA program. This result indicates that EMBA programs may improve the strategic skills and performance management of their graduates and increase their insight into their personal development as leaders. This is consistent with findings reported by London and Mone (1999) that EMBA programs promote leadership development.

Research question 2 *asked: To what extent are the four levels of Kirkpatrick's evaluation (1994) related to Kouzes and Posner's (1988) five leadership practices?*

Results of these correlation statistics for current students indicated that there were no significant relationships between Kirkpatrick's evaluation levels and exemplary leadership. However, curriculum was significantly associated with work environment $r = .55$, $p < .01$ and transfer of knowledge $r = .32$, $p < .05$.

These results for the graduates showed that exemplary leadership had significant correlations with all evaluation variables. The support for the hypothesis that evaluation scales and leadership practices are significantly correlated was found in the case of graduates.

Research question 3 asked: *Do the four levels of Kirkpatrick's (1994) evaluation predict leadership practices?* Hierarchical

multiple regression analysis was conducted to predict Kouzes and Posner's exemplary leadership practices as an outcome variable based on the responses of the four variables (expectations, curriculum, work environment, and transfer of knowledge) and the covariate variables (age, gender, and work experience) as predictor variables. As there was a significant difference between current students and graduates in exemplary leadership as mentioned in research question 2, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted separately for current students and graduates. There were no predictors found for current students; however, there were significant predictors found for graduates.

Results of hierarchical multiple regression analysis for graduates showed that the R^2 value (.527) indicates that about 52.7% of the variance in exemplary leadership was explained by the seven predictor variables. The β values indicate the relative influence of the entered variables; that is, curriculum had the greatest influence on exemplary leadership (β =.498, $p < .001$), followed by transfer of knowledge (β = .275, $p < .01$), gender (β = .203, $p < .05$), and age (β = -.341, $p < .05$).

Supplemental Data

There were 15 responses from current students and 33 responses from graduates. The results were as follows: 15 respondents expected to increase new knowledge and skills, 18 expected to gain social networks, and 14 expected to achieve career advancement.

When taking into account the limitation of this study, a potential challenge was sample size only if there were insufficient results. As the sampling frame for current students and graduates was limited to one EMBA program, a low response rate could reduce the statistical power. Thus, the ability to detect real differences between the two groups may have been affected by the small and unequal sample sizes.

The demographic information included age, gender, and work experience; however, additional data such as educational

background, certification, job category, and years in current position were overlooked in measuring leadership capabilities. Measuring leadership is complicated. It is possible that additional demographic information would have given a more holistic view of leadership skills and the effect that various demographic factors have on these skills.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

Several implications emerge from the results of this study. First, curriculum appears to play the most significant role in predicting the use of leadership practices, reflecting a positive correlation. According to Robinson and Wick (1992), researchers have estimated that 70% of all leadership development occurs through informal, on-the-job experiences, while formal education programs contribute less than 10% to leadership development. Therefore, the finding of this study is important in pointing out that the role of formal education should be addressed because well-organized curricula are more likely to address the needs of business organizations in developing leadership. As with earlier formal learning theory, this study supports the importance of formal education.

Second, Ormrod (2006) noted the importance of delivery and practice in adult education. If the objective is application, teachers should focus instruction and assessment methods on activities involving real objects and hands-on measurements for discovery learning that requires fostering transfer, problem solving, creativity, and self-regulated learning. Curriculum was the most significant predictor in terms of the use of leadership in this study; this is important because it gives practitioners or administrators in business schools a strategy for promoting best practices for the transfer of knowledge in EMBA programs.

Third, the responses to the open-ended question support the practical needs of adult learners. Respondents‘ expectations included new knowledge/skills, access to broader social networks, and career advancement after the completion of their EMBA programs. This implies that adult learners are more likely to need

immediate achievement in a myopic way. The findings may guide administrators to consider how they can balance the curriculum by applying pedagogical and andragogical approaches.

Last, the outcome assessment study based on Kirkpatrick's evaluation levels focusing on the learning process was conducted in management education. The results of this study should encourage school administrators to conduct outcome assessment studies to determine what their students are learning and what blocks the school mission of preparing people to manage and lead (Boyatzis & Saatcioglu, 2008).

CONCLUSION

Ottoson (1995) stated that educators and learners should consider the process by acknowledging the value of education and understanding that application and daily work are related but not synonymous concepts or theories. Hoffman (1981) labeled application as a key factor in adult education. In management education, application is most often understood as putting theories, principles, concepts, and ideas into practice. It deals with what is feasible, adaptable, and workable rather than with theoretical concepts.

Adult learners are required to have contextual application knowledge, which entails flexibility. Glaser (1990) referred to a worker who demonstrates effective application of knowledge as a skillful thinker. However, application does not guarantee outcomes (Ottoson, 1995) in terms of how learners transfer what they have learned to novel workplace tasks or other situations.

This study examined the relationship between EMBA students' transfer of knowledge and leadership practices to the workplace. The study investigated the major characteristics of EMBA programs regarding expectations, curriculum, work environment, and transfer of knowledge—all factors that may impact leadership skills.

The findings of this study imply that universities are still an invaluable source of knowledge and learning to produce successful outcomes in adult education. In other words, the curriculum design has a positive effect on students‘ transfer of knowledge that is closely related to the use of leadership practices. The results for the open-ended question show that approaches that are less theoretical and more practical are more likely to be welcomed by EMBA students. However, management education programs must balance academic and practical approaches in order to offer specific step-by-step instructions using an algorithm and a heuristic way of learning. This would enable students to seek not only to improve their self-development for credentialed job opportunities but also to develop long-term visions to be outstanding leaders in a turbulent globalized society.

Few studies have examined evaluation practices based on Kirkpatrick‘s four-level model (reaction, learning, transfer, and results). By linking the level of expectations, curriculum, work environment, transfer, and leadership practices to covariate variables (age, gender, and work experience), this study provides an empirical investigation showing that developing leadership skills is not simple and that knowledge and skill should be in place to facilitate the process of developing leaders. The results of this study are a significant step toward predicting and explaining the leadership development process in business organizations through evaluating the effectiveness of executive education programs.

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